

THE BUILDER,

NO. XXXVII.

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 28, 1843.

THE SUSSEX MEMORIAL DESIGN, BY MR. HANSON.*

Extract from a Letter to Mr. Hanson concerning his Design, and his Reply.

MY DEAR SIR,—

I have scarcely made up my mind whether to like your "Sussex" affair or not. In fact, I would rather say I do not like it. What other verdict could you expect from a "Pinnock's Catechism," and "Pugin's Grammar" man? You ought to think yourself well off that such a fellow speaks of it in only a half condemnatory way. My opinion is that these experiments of yours upon the "Harmony of Discords" will never do. It can't succeed. People are that it is neither fish, fowl, nor flesh; and if you tell them that they are wrong, and that you have provided them with all three, it will be just as little to their taste.

I cannot say how heartily I fall in with your thoughts and feelings about the insignificance and silliness of "obelisks," and "pillars," and "single statues." You certainly are quite right when you insist upon "edifices" as proper monumental memorials, and I hope you never get up the agitation of this question in all right places and times. The project for the grand "Nelson Tower" was conceived in a very just and worthy spirit. But, if I carry in my memory the right impression of what you used to say about it, it would have been (almost by the necessity of its plainness of construction) a building of a most decidedly homogeneous character—its main characteristic, next to its awful dimensions, was to have been its homogeneity. How different, in this one and telling respect, from the Sussex conglomeration of uncombinable elements. It is a very beautifully-devised thing as far as abstract shape and arrangement go; but it wants augustness, it wants oneness. How easy would it have been to have taken some ancient parish cross, and to have swelled it out to the desired dimensions, in this way you would have given it those attributes which (in my eye, at least) it very much wants. Why should you be perpetually hanting after novelties and experimental combinations, while there is lying all around you such a rich legacy of beauty which the men of old have left you in this wonderfully adaptable and all-pervading architecture of ancient England?

Yours very faithfully, J. A.

MY DEAR REV. SIR,—

I gladly avail myself of the occasion supplied by your acceptable letter to answer a few objections that have fallen in my way concerning my Sussex Memorial Design. Yours is the best specimen I am enabled to select, and in answering it, I shall have done the most that is in my power to square accounts between myself and the critics up to this period. Several letters I have had of a laudatory kind, but these are nothing to the purpose, except in so far as they confirm me in the hope that to a reasonable degree I have right on my side, and encourage me to persevere. I have a great desire to travel in the world with a tolerably free passport, and would rather wait till my friends approve, than force my way against their objections, however unreasonably entertained. I begrudge not the labour, therefore, of endeavouring to convince them; a little clearing of the road at first may prove the speediest means of future travelling.

You say you "have scarcely made up your mind yet," which I interpret favourably, inasmuch as it tends to shew that you are not giving implicit trust to mere habits of thinking and liking, but are disposed to reason and argue with yourself, and to correct, if needs be, any erroneous impression of taste you may have formed. I can easily understand why you would rather say you do not like it; but I perceive in such irresolution many influences of partiality, prejudice, and fear; and these things

not being based upon a firm bottom, are open to attack and dislodgement, about which I hesitate not to set myself, as resolutely as my anxiety to be right with a friend, and to have him right, will admit of. And so you think that I am experimenting on the "harmony of discords"? Pray, my dear Sir, are you not begging the question most hugely, are you not going in the very teeth of all that is to be affirmed from the premises? Shew me that I have taken the discordant and harsh sounds in any of the languages of art, and then it will be right to charge me with the vain experiment of harmonizing them? Why the directly contrary is the fact! I have been revelling in the choice of concords, at least so to my taste, and I have not heard any one yet dispute it, or shew what objectionable or offensive manner of ancient art I have adopted. You know a beautiful speech of Chateaubriand's about the prismatic spectrum—how from a single pencil or ray of light many and beautiful colours are thrown out, which he applied to the labours of that school of artists who issued from the cloisters in Florence, with Fra Angelico, whom you and I have delighted to contemplate; how the artist brothers out of their cells resembled each the rainbow tint; how the painter, the poet, the preacher, lived in their refraction or going out; but how, retired within the sanctuary, one soul of devotion, one ray of glorious light alone was visible. Time has been the spectrum in art, and a very rainbow, wide arching from the earth's extremes, has been built;—from one principal and focal light, primitive and compound colours, all beautiful, have been thrown forth. This spectrum is not yet set. Harmonies of colour, or, to revert to your simile, harmonies of concords, are yet to be produced, and it is my belief that still one primitive—a whole tone of sound or colour, call it what you will,—is in reserve; and half tones and blendings of the primitives, and of new compounds, remain to constitute the good and the pure of mundane enjoyment.

Your good-natured banter, as to its being neither fish, fowl, nor flesh, reminds me of a similar compliment paid to myself in a political discussion in which I was once drawn to take a share by a zealot of party, and, in truth, I am constrained to lament that art now-a-days, like politics, seems to be considered a party question, and mobs and clubs are mistaken for arbiters. Well, my hot politician, after expending a large proportion of his fire, without warning me into a siding or opposing, turned his weapon of assault upon me for being, as he termed it, "neither fish, flesh, nor fowl." Upon which I quietly remarked, that I was content with his definition, and should be glad to know which of the three he considered himself. But you say "people" will not be satisfied without they have one or the other, and you very appropriately make it a question of taste. Are you quite sure that in these days of high "goats" a dish made up of the three will not be acceptable to them. Suppose my design to be fitly characterized as being neither "fish, fowl, nor flesh," what say you, and what will people say to a feast of genuine turtle? Mind you, I do not vouch for its genuineness, or plume myself upon my fishing or research, and perhaps I ought the less to do so, when you undertake to dub it a "conglomerate of uncombinable elements." You may have the true smack of an epicure, and detect in it a mockery, and being made of uncombinable elements, a bad mockery at best; but I am not quite satisfied that if not a genuine primitive, it is not a good conglomerate—

and for my part I had as lief have mock-turtle as mock-fish, mock-deal, and mock-fowl, to which the gastronomes in the kitchen of art are so liberally treating us at every turn.

You appear to me to confound homogeneity with a word I will coin, *homogeneity*; my Nelson Tower design was a sort of *homogeneous* structure, single-featured and single-bodied, so is an obelisk, a pyramid, a monolith; but a thing may be homogeneous, and yet have many parts. Without intending a pun, I may instance man as the best definition of homogeneity; he is a conglomerate, too, "fearfully and wonderfully made," yet he is an incarnation of unity.

You say my design wants augustness as well as this feature of concords. In this I think you are unfortunate. If I pride myself upon any thing in it, it is in obtaining the first quality. One little word I will venture to say in this respect—let it be built, and if its effect be not august, august to almost overpowering, it will be content to have it set against me as a miserable failure. I have a notion that it would be fearfully august,—four huge hem-cylinders in masonry, springing from a pedestal of sixty feet cube, and supporting a fabric of kindred fiefs of masonry, bold and expressive as the convolutions of so many master oaks of the forest, and borne on the top of this, as is the calyx of a beautiful flower, the germinating principle of the arch which pervades the design. A combination of this nature, homogeneous essentially, and absolutely homogeneous as I contend it to be, will not, I think, be wanting in augustness, and for the rest it is answered.

But I may be told it is not practical. Shades of the heroes in art! who reared ribs and vaults and domes high in the cloud, with almost unseen dependence upon earth. I offer it to you devoutly, fervently, enthusiastically! Let your deeds attest whether I have too dangerously emulated you in this—whether I have not staid at humble and becoming distance. I am confident in my art—it obtains my faith, my hope, and my love.

A parish cross—there you have hit the mark—but how you should stultify on it, and see that I had not previously taken my stand there. Why, I have taken the parish cross, reverently and without profanity. What the parish cross contained in principle and in essence applicable to a Freemason and a Sussex Memorial I have taken, but not prostituted or profaned by mechanical and doltish eclecticism—at least so I hope.

Lastly, you observe, why should I be perpetually hunting after novelties, &c. Let me ask, why should I not? Is not the new and the old alike from one source; may I not hunt after novelty, as you term it, as well as *take into antiquity*? Is the inventive less honourable than the appropriative genius? Is research, and the holding up the telescope to the future, less commendable than poring into the ruins of the past? Would you deny the novelties of gas and steam in favour of the old light of wheels and rashes, and the early engine of locomotion? Would you have checked a Watt in his career, a Fulton or a Stephenson, and bid them be content with the rich legacy of utility which the old world found suited to its wants? No, I am assured you would not; and he who would were an impious and an impotent. All we require is to turn the talent with which Heaven has blessed us to the best account, and in obedience to its laws; and that I and you may never deviate from this, bounding on to the future, or lingering by the past, is the earnest prayer and hope of your faithful and sincere friend,

JOSEPH HANSON.

* See No. 33 of THE BUILDER.